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AUTHOR Jones, Brent M.
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ABSTRACT

While the influence of competence on interpersonal attraction has been examined from several perspectives, the attraction literature is relatively silent with respect to competitive interactions between the sexes. A study was conducted to examine the roles of competence and physical appearance in liking responses. Male (N=43) and female (N=53) college students competed in a staged quiz against a "pretty" or "plain" female confederate, the level of attractiveness predetermined by grooming and mode of dress. Quiz questions represented the subjects' favorite and the confederates' ostensive least favorite category. Having memorized the answers, confederates either decisively won or lost. Following the contest, subjects and confederates were directed to an adjoining room to sit on a bench. Subjects sat closer to and better liked the prettier confederate. Liking was found to be independent of the competitive outcome. These results suggest the subordinate role of competitiveness vis-a-vis appearance on liking judgments. (NB)

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Interpersonal Attraction as a Function of Appearance and Competition

Brent M. Jones

Texas Christian University

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Interpersonal Attraction as a Function of Appearance and Competition

ABSTRACT

The roles of competence and physical appearance in liking responses were examined by having subjects compete against a pretty or plain female confederate in a quiz. Questions represented the subjects' favorite and the confedederates' ostensive least favorite category. Having memorized answers, confederates either decisively won or lost. Following the contest, subjects sat closer to and better liked the prettier confederate. Surprisingly, liking was independent of the competitive outcome. Results indicate the subordinate role of competitive vis-a-vis appearance on liking judgments.

The influence of competence on interpersonal attraction has been examined from several perspectives. Aronson, Willerman, & Floyd (1966), for instance, discovered that the attractiveness of someone with superior abilities is greater than that of a mediocre person. Furthermore, liking for the superior individual alone was enhanced following a pratfall or social blunder. Additionally, Mettee and Riskind (1974) studied competence and liking in a question and answer contest in which subjects and confederates initially demonstrated equal abilities. But whenever the confederate's performance warranted her elevation to an incomparably superior intellectual status, she was liked better than a non-promoted competitor who only marginally defeated the subject. A possible explanation is that "if we are competing with someone, we may dislike that person unless the individual is so good that he or she clearly outclasses us and we cannot be compared with that person" (Riskind and Wilson, 1982, p. 450).

Curiously, the attraction literature is relatively silent with respect to competitive interactions between the sexes. How would a female's physical appearance influence likability following competitions against both sexes? To seek an answer, the current research explored liking for an attractively or unattractively dressed

female confederate who either decisively defeated, or who was decisively defeated by subjects in an oral quiz (Superior and Mediocre conditions).

Hypotheses 1 and 2 follow from the Aronson, et al. (1966) experiment. Similar to a pratfall, unattractiveness was predicted to mitigate the threat introduced by extreme competence.

Hypothesis 1: Both males and females will like the Superior opponent more than they will like her Mediocre counterpart.

Hypothesis 2: Males will like the unattractive Superior opponent more than they will like the attractive Superior opponent.

The third hypothesis follows from Deaux's (1972) experiments which demonstrated that, unlike men, women most liked superior non-pratfallers.

Hypothesis 3: Female subjects will like the attractive better than the unattractive Superior opponent.

Method

Subjects. Fifty-three female and forty-three male general psychology students participated in the study at Texas Christian University.

Procedure. Two normally attractive college-aged women served as confederates and appeared in two modes of dress. When unattractive, confederates participated without make-up while sporting drab garments, outmoded

eyeglasses and unflattering, greasy hairdos. In the contrasting attractive condition, confederates were well groomed in lovely outfits. Pretesting revealed no significant differences between the two confederates with respect to attractiveness ratings in the two dress conditions. But as expected, there was a significant difference between being pretty and plain for both confederates, t (47) = 8.64, $p < .01$.

The chosen task was an oral question and answer game using questions pretested for difficulty by undergraduates. Confederates memorized correct answers prior to the contest. The experiment followed a 2 (sex of subject) X 2 (pretty or plain confederate) X 2 (confederate won or lost) factorial design. Subjects were randomly assigned to conditions with the goal of including equal numbers of males and females in the cells. The subject and confederate first took a warm-up written test and then selected the two categories in which they felt most and least competent. The experimenter announced that the subject's least favorite category happened to be the confederate's favorite. As a result of a staged coin flip, the favorite category of the relieved subject was always selected for the oral contest. In the game, winning confederates ostensibly bettered 80% of past contestants, while losing subjects bettered 50% (i.e., average). Conversely, losing

confederates scored 20% compared to the winning subjects' 80%.

Players then completed a questionnaire and were directed to an adjoining room within which was situated a 6 foot long bench. The accomplice entered first so as to take a position at one extreme end of the bench, while subjects sat as close to her as desired. One attraction measure was Byrne's (1971) Interpersonal Judgment Scale (IJS). A second, unobtrusive measure was obtained by determining the number of inches separating the contestants. Subjects received the customary debriefing.

Results and Discussion

Data for both confederates were combined since they followed the same pattern. Post-test questionnaire responses were subjected to separate 2 X 2 X 2 ANOVAs and analyzed to confirm that when dressed attractively, confederates were seen as significantly better looking than when attired unattractively (F (1, 87) = 30.96, MSe = 2.93, $p < .01$). Other checks (all significant to at least the .05 level) indicated that subjects were well aware of the quality of their own performances, were significantly less satisfied when they lost than when they won, and perceived that confederates evaluated them

accordingly. Outcome satisfaction and perceptions of the confederate's evaluation had a .84 correlation. Moreover, subjects thought winning confederates were significantly more intelligent, demonstrated greater knowledge of current events, and were better adjusted than their plain counterparts.

The IJS likability judgments are presented in Table 1 with higher scores indicative of greater liking.

Insert Table 1 about here

Significant main effects were found for the physical appearance variable only (F (1, 88) = 4.07, MSe = 3.63, $p < .05$) in that confederates were liked significantly more when attractive than when unattractive. However, winning and losing produced almost identical liking responses by subjects (Ms = 10.65 and 10.72).

Seating distance measurements are given in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Main effects were found for the appearance variable only, as subjects sat significantly closer to the confederate when she was pretty than when she was not (F (1, 88) = 0.20, MSe = 34.77, $p < .01$). The IJS liking

measure and the attractiveness judgments had a correlation of .74.

These results are sobering inasmuch as data from past experimental contests (which, to be sure, did not manipulate the appearance variable) suggested that winning and losing differentially affected subjects' liking or closeness ratings (e.g., Pleban & Tesser, 1981). In the present case, the contest was so designed that contestants could hardly have failed to compare themselves to their opponent, even before final scores were announced. Actually seeing the Mediocre player struggling time and again with an "easy" question, for example, was predicted to more strongly influence liking judgments.

The finding that physical beauty is related to attraction is hardly surprising. However, the impact of cosmetic appeal was not at all expected to completely overwhelm the influence of winning or losing a stimulating competition. Nevertheless, the first hypothesis that males as well as females would like Superior opponents better than Mediocre opponents, attractiveness notwithstanding, was not supported. Indeed, attractiveness was central in liking judgments. Likewise contrary to the second prediction, males preferred the pretty Superior opponent to her plain counterpart and selected the attractive over the

unattractive Mediocre opponent as well.

The final hypothesis was that attractive Superior confederates would be liked more by females than would the unattractive Superior confederates. While failing to reach significance, scores were clearly in the hypothesized direction.

The truly surprising finding, however, was that neither the dissatisfaction with losing, nor the perception that confederates judged them harshly when they lost, impelled subjects to indicate either greater or lesser liking for the Superior than for the Mediocre player. Thus, in the context of half an hour's competition against an opponent presumed less competent in a specific category, attraction was shown to be principally determined by the opponent's physical appearance. Other things equal, we may still like highly competent individuals more than we do less capable people. But when pitted against physical attractiveness in the short term, competence plays the subservient role in liking. It appears, therefore, that competence is more likely to exert an influence on interpersonal attraction when physical appearance cues are not prominent.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations

of Liking Scores

	Accomplice's Appearance			
Contest Outcome	Unattractive		Attractive	
Subject Lost	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Males	9.64	2.38	10.58	1.93
Females	10.42	1.93	11.71	1.94
Subject Won				
Males	10.00	2.14	10.83	1.95
Females	10.83	1.59	10.93	1.49

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations

of Seating Distances (Inches)

	Accomplice's Appearance			
Contest Outcome	Unattractive		Attractive	
Subject Lost	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Males	27.65	6.42	25.54	4.15
Females	26.61	7.80	21.70	5.63
Subject Won				
Males	27.79	6.16	24.42	7.03
Females	27.65	5.08	24.23	5.03

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